



Al-Risala 1986

May

2 May 1986

Editorial

Modern Spanish historians show a marked aversion for the Islamic period of their history. One specialist in Spanish mediaeval history, for instance, has written that if Islam had not come to Spain, his country would have developed along the same lines as France, Germany, Italy and England. Indeed it would have led Europe on the path of progress. He lays the blame for Spain's relative backwardness fairly and squarely on the shoulders of Islam. While admitting that Europe as a whole benefitted greatly from Islam, he claims that as far as Spain was concerned it proved a barrier to human progress.

The very same Islam that proved a mercy for the rest of Europe could not have damaged Spanish interests. The fact that there is this difference shows that the fault lies, not with Islam, but with the Spaniards themselves. Professor J.B. Trend lays the blame on the negative policies pursued by Spain. After the Muslim conquest of Iberia (711AD), centres of resistance to the "Muslim invaders" were established throughout the north of the peninsula, the majority of the population resorting to destructive opposition. The undue attention given to the military affairs meant that not enough attention was paid to improving Spain's academic capability and economic performance.

Finally, in the 16th century AD, the Spanish resistance was successful in overthrowing the Muslim government. All the Muslims of Spain were either killed or expelled from the land. But the price paid for this spectacular success was a heavy one. Spain was robbed of all its skilled workers and farmers. With a vacuum of this nature in its society, it was inevitable that Spain should experience economic decline.

Even when Spain no longer had Islam to contend with, its people took to fighting among themselves. Accustomed to war against the Muslims, the Christian states of Spain now had no Muslims to fight with; so they made their own fellow Christians the target of their aggression. Their sectarianism led to the growth of varying dialects and traditions. The centuries spent in negative opposition to Muslim rule had been wasted; it had led to nothing more than civil strife, which ruined the era that ensued.

2 May 1986

Wrongful accusation is the worst possible crime

Ali ibn Abu Talib was asked what weighed heaviest upon the heavens. "Wrongful accusation of an innocent person," he replied.

3 May 1986

Initial Preparation

A term well-known to people in the textile industry is pretreatment. Pretreatment is the process which coarse cloth is put through so that it can be worked into a fine, finished product. Without pretreatment, cloth is not suitable for advanced treatment, and cannot reach a refined state.

For instance, cloth has to be dyed. But before the dye can be added, the cloth has to be cleaned. This cleaning is the "pretreatment" for dying. If the cloth is not properly cleaned in preparation for dying, the colour will run. Besides, colour does not stand out on cloth which has not been thoroughly cleaned in advance. It is estimated that about 70% of reject cloth which comes through the mills of textile factories, has been rendered faulty by the application of dye without adequate pretreatment of the cloth.

Initial preparation is essential in human affairs, just as it is indispensable in the textile industry. We cannot expect our initiatives to reach a successful conclusion if we do not prepare the ground for them in advance. Any move made without sufficient preparation is doomed to failure, just as cloth which is dyed without having been pretreated is doomed to join the reject pile.

Journalism, for example, cannot come into existence without industry. If one does not possess the know-how needed to handle advanced equipment one will not be able to progress in the highly competitive world of journalism. It is not enough just to gather a team of reporters and put pen to paper; one must first have access to the machinery needed to convert reports into the columns of a newspaper.

The same is true in the political arena. If a party wishes to attract votes, it must first show itself to be united. How can a party which is itself in disarray expect others to join its rank? The need for initial preparation is present in every walk of life, in private affairs as well as in public life. Those who seek to achieve high ideals, but do not wish to go through the tedium of doing extensive groundwork first, are building sandcastles which will not be able to stand the test of time. Their ambitions are no more than flights of fantasy which will never get off the ground in the world of hard realities.

4-5 May 1986

Man's Plight

How grand and imposing the dome appeared from afar. Less so when the great edifice was entered and there appeared, lying as low as low could be, a solitary grave. What a contrast between that mighty dome – a symbol of human greatness, and that lowly grave – testimony to man's utter helplessness. The two constructions presented a picture of the startling and agonizing discrepancy between what man seeks in this world and what actually comes his way.

He seeks to consolidate his own position on earth, to establish his own greatness; but the most that he achieves in the end is a dome, concealing one devastated and done away with by death. Man seeks to take his fill of worldly pleasures, but it is a mouthful of earth that is his final portion. He seeks to devour everything in sight upon this earth, only to be himself devoured, by this very earth.

When he speaks, he seems to be defying God, but he cannot truly defy God, for God hears all that he says. By his own actions, he sets himself on an infernal course. If only he realized the consequences of his deeds! If only he saw the folly of condemning himself to a fate that he does not have the strength to bear.

So clear is the picture of truth that appears before man on this earth, that one would not expect him to deny it; yet he does so. Wilfully and scornfully, he casts truth to one side, putting his own interests first. Sometimes his own faults loom before him, clear as the midday sun, yet still he does not acknowledge them. Sometimes his attention is drawn to some home truth. Despite having no reasonable argument with which to defend himself, he finds words with which to cast blame on his admonisher.

What a strong stand he takes against oppression, but it is oppression perpetrated by others that he objects to, not that of which he himself is guilty. Blissfully oblivious to his own corruption, he is quick to expose corruption, and take a stand against it, when he views others as corrupt. When it comes to fulfilling the rights of others, he is negligent in the extreme. He is quick, though, to take up the cause of those who have been denied their rights by others besides himself.

In order to consolidate his own power, man raises false slogans, not minding if a whole nation has to suffer as a result. He seeks to advance his own interests at the expense of others, not seeing that in his attempt to trample on the rights of others, he is in fact trampling on truth. He lives in a dream world, though the only world worth living in is one based on truth and reality.

Man has been created to dwell in paradise, but he seems to be bent on denying himself its pleasures as he careers on the downward course to hell.

5 May 1986

Having one's Share

The Bata Shoe Company is named after the family which founded it. Originally the Bata family lived in Czechoslovakia, where they began manufacturing shoes as far back as 1620. Thomas Bata Senior, father of the present proprietor, established a shoe factory for the first time in 1925. His career was cut short though when his private plane lost its bearings in heavy fog and crashed, burning him to death on the spot. On his father's death, Thomas Bata Junior became president of Bata Ltd.

The Bata Shoe Company, the largest shoe manufacturer in the world, is now doing business in 114 different countries, having sold 315 million pairs of shoes throughout the world in 1982. Its greatest volume of business is in Canada, with India ranking second. It has 90 thousand direct employees not to mention thousands of indirect employees.

Mr. Thomas Bata Junior visited India for the fortieth time in 1983. On this occasion, a correspondent asked him what he thought was the most important factor in his success. Mr. Bata replied, "In manufacturing shoes which range from cheap to costly, we take special care to fulfill the actual needs of our consumers. We do, in fact, look after our customers better than anyone else."

What we learn from the Bata Shoe Company's success is that if you want to take, you should try to give. It is only in giving to others that we can have our share too.

5 May 1986

Humility raises one to great heights

Abu Huraira reported this saying of the Prophet: "No article is below being given as charity. God makes one who forgives more respected, and He exalts one who humbles himself before the Lord."

(Muslim)

6 May 1986

The Test of Adversity

God, in creating man, endowed him with nobility of character. He then set him down in a world fraught with moral dangers, a world where such circumstances exist as can at any moment incite him to fall into evil ways. Life then for man becomes a great moral tussle, a struggle in which right and wrong pull him in opposite directions. Those who consistently do good works while treading the straight and narrow path, who, in short, do their utmost to preserve the noble image in which God created man, will be amply rewarded by God, while those who become abased and wicked, sinking into sin and corruption will be consigned without second thoughts to hellfire and damnation.

The present world is a testing ground: it was created solely for that purpose. Here, fear of loss and hope of gain arouse ignoble feelings, in particular, the desire to exploit one's fellow-men. Ego is the great obstacle which bars the way to justice. Here, sensual enticements lead man to seek ephemeral pleasures. A clash of interests engenders anger, hatred and niggardliness. This is what is meant by earth being the 'lowest of the low', as it is called in the Quran. Man is required to rise above such base impulses and prove himself worthy of his noble image. It can be ascertained whether a fruit is good or bad only when it is cut open. Human beings are no different in this respect. Whether they live in the company of angels, or spend their time hobnobbing with Satan can be known only when, as psychic entities they are split asunder – when they are confronted with dire adversity. Their essential natures are revealed in situations which are full of stress and temptations.

The evil take their cue from the devil, while the virtuous act on the promptings of the angels, their lives being characterized by love, selflessness, justice and humility. Adversity reveals whether or not man truly remembers God. Those who exhibit divine traits of character even in the face of adversity are the sole creatures who will have the honour to live in close proximity of God when they enter the world hereafter.

6 May 1986

Sitting among others, without distinction

The Prophet came to see Abdullah ibn Amr Ibn'ul-Aas. The latter offered him a leather pillow to sit on, but the Prophet sat on the ground, and left the pillow lying in between them.

7 May 1986

Working one's Way Up

A man entered a certain recruiting office and said, "I want to join as a soldier."

"But how old are you?" the sergeant asked.

"Sixty," was the man's reply.

"You know quite well that sixty is too old for you to become a soldier."

"All right, if 60 is too old for a soldier, don't you need any generals?"

If one wants to start one's career as a general, one will be hard put to it to do so. It's just like a race where one can't leap straight from the starting point to the finishing line. To succeed in anything, we have to be like the tree, starting from the seed, growing slowly and putting out branches, twigs, leaves and flowers when the appropriate times come around. Similarly, business starts with investing money, not with earning profits. The construction of a house starts with the foundations and not with the roof. Eating begins with the sowing of seeds, not with the laying of the table. The factory begins with the acquisition of machinery and not with the sale of the end products.

Congregational matters are very much on a parallel. They begin from the inculcation in individuals of a sense of purpose and an understanding of the importance of hard work, honesty, endurance and unity.

Not until the individuals of a nation are imbued with these important ideals to a very high degree can measures be taken for the advancement of the cause. If we ignore the importance of preconditioning, our missionary ventures are bound- to end in failure. Any attempt to launch a movement without a solid, national infrastructure would be like trying to roof a house without raising its walls. A roof put up in this way is bound eventually to collapse on one's head. In much the same way, any steps taken before individuals have been properly prepared for them will lead inevitably to failure and chaos even death and destruction. They will be found to lead only further and further away from the true objectives.

The Prophet said: "God raises one who is humble before Him – one who considers himself small, but is great in the eyes of men."

(Tafseer Ibn Kathir)

Seeking the Right Alternatives

A luckless passenger rushed, panting, into the station just as his train was steaming out. His watch – unaccountably slow by ten minutes – had let him down. “Don’t worry, Babuji,” sympathised a passing porter, there will be another train along in about a couple of hours. Why go away? Just wait here for it on this same platform.” The passenger, keen to reach his destination, decided to accept his advice, even if it meant waiting two, long tedious hours. Just getting to where he wanted to go was too important to him to think of expending time and energy coming and going from the station all over again, and perhaps missing his train once again, so he stayed right where he was and catch his train he did.

When we miss a train, there is always the comforting knowledge that there is that next train coming along. That is the lesson that the platform teaches. It is then up to us to make the correct decision about our next move. But it is surprising how many people fail to grasp this reality. They are inexplicably plunged into gloom and depression when they fail initially to grasp an opportunity and frequently adopt such a pessimistic attitude that they fritter away their precious energies in blaming others for their failures. How much better it would be if they were to make a proper assessment of the situation, taking all possibilities into account, and then seek new ways and means of achieving their goals, even if it means a lengthy wait: This is a matter simply of patience and determination. There is always that “next train” for them to catch. It is just a question of being properly alert to this, and being ready to avail of that God-given second opportunity.

If, in any given situation, someone with whom you have business or personal relations turns hostile, pursuing a policy of open confrontation seldom reaps rewards. It is almost invariably more politic to extend courtesy, love and sympathy. That is the way to a person’s heart. It is only by pursuing such a course that a formidable foe may be transformed into a faithful friend.

Suppose you work in an office and, for reasons which you fail to comprehend, you are dismissed. In such a situation, if initial attempts to clear your name and have yourself honourably reinstated come to naught, it is seldom worthwhile persisting in your efforts. It is far better to wash your hands of the whole situation and try to break new ground elsewhere. That way you can sometimes do even better than before.

Often when someone does not pay you your dues, your first inclination is to enter into legal battles with him, or wage a relentless psychological war on him. Either course should be eschewed, for the net result is generally wasted time and money. Years can go by without your receiving anything in return for a great deal of energy spent. No, it is better to ignore the injustice done to you, and to put your trust in hard work to get what you want out of life. It is perfectly possible that through sheer diligence you will succeed in achieving all those things you wanted others to give you as a matter of right.

Most personal problems are the result of a limited outlook on life. If people were to broaden their perspectives they would soon realize that there are many different ways of approaching the same problem. It would, above all, become clear to them that things which are impossible to obtain by direct confrontation can be achieved by the patient fostering of mutual goodwill. Where provocation and retaliation have failed, patience and human concern will succeed.

9 May 1986

To help another out is a great act of worship

Abdullah ibn Abbas was sitting in retreat (*Itikaf**) in the Prophet's mosque in Medina, when a person came and sat next to him. Detecting signs of distress on the man's face, Ibn Abbas asked him what was the matter. "I owe a person some money," the man replied, "and by the lord of this grave, I am not able to repay it." "Should I speak to the claimant on your behalf?" Ibn Abbas left the mosque at once, the man reminded him that he was in retreat. "Perhaps you have forgotten," he said. "I have not forgotten," Ibn Abbas told him, "but – and it seems like only yesterday – I have heard from the lord of this grave," – tears came into the eyes of the Prophet's companion and cousin as he spoke – "that to do one's best to help one's brother is better than spending ten years in retreat."

(Baihaqi)

* Seeking retirement in a mosque during the last ten days of the fast of Ramazan; during which time the worshipper does not leave the place, except for necessary purposes. The time is spent in reciting the Quran and in remembering God.

10 May 1986

Words of Wisdom

Imam Abu Dawood¹ (202-275AH), who hailed from Sijistan near Kandhar, was a pupil of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hambal². He once said that during the lengthy journeys he undertook in pursuit of knowledge, he wrote down 5,00,000 traditions. Of these he selected 8,800 for his magnum opus, the Sunan of Abu Dawood. He singles out four Ahadith for special mention. If their meaning really penetrates one's heart, he says, they will give one ample religious understanding. The four traditions are:

"Deeds are according to their intentions."

"One of the finest Islamic virtues a person can have is for him to forsake vain talk."

"A believer is not true in his faith until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself."

"Lawful things are clear, as are unlawful things. In between them are matters of dubious legality. Whoever steers clear of the doubtful things will steer his faith on a safe course."

There is a rich collection of quotations attributed to Imam Abu Dawood: "Hidden desires consists of a lust for power." "The best word is that which enters the ear without permission," and "Whoever makes do with modest food and clothing has given his body a rest." These are but a few of this collection.

When a person discovers faith in depth, he attaches supreme importance to realities rather than forms. Vain talk – that which has no meaning – holds no attraction for him. He does not differentiate between friends and strangers in his treatment of people. He becomes scrupulous in his actions – avoiding even doubtful things. He has no desire to raise himself in the eyes of men. It is his very humility, and the simplicity of his lifestyle, that invest his words with the force to penetrate people's hearts.

1. The compiler of one of the six correct books of Sunni traditions, called the *Sunnan Abi Daud*.
2. The founder of the fourth orthodox School of the Sunnis, was born at Baghdad A.H. 164, A.D. 780.

11 May 1986

“Each in its Own Orbit Runs.”

Modern technology has produced a mechanical ‘man’ – the robot – which performs the prodigious feats of walking, talking and working. But, at the end of it all, it functions in a purely mechanical way, just like any other man-made machine. In no way does it evince the subtlety of behaviour controlled by human intelligence which we find in homo sapiens.

On one notable occasion a robot was hired by a London office to perform the services of an office boy. As soon as it was installed, the lady secretary, a Miss Jennie Seff, decided to give it a trial run. She was testing the battery, when, the robot sprang to life and began to stalk along behind her. Miss Seff walked faster and faster as it bore down on her, then started to run to escape its relentless pursuit, but the robot followed on her heels with equal rapidity. In the process, a new typewriter was knocked over and damaged. Finally, with great difficulty the robot was brought under control (30 June, 1981).

In the world of today, those who do not believe in God say that the universe is nothing but a vast machine, and that it moves like a robot, in a mindless, mechanical fashion. But for millions and millions of years the perfect and harmonious movement of the universe has contradicted such a supposition. Had the universe been a mere robot-like mechanism, there would certainly have been many unaccountable clashes – like the one in the London office.

According to the Quran, “The sun hastens to its resting place; that is the decree of the Mighty One, the All-knowing. And for the moon, we have ordained mansions till it becomes again as an old dry palm branch. The sun is not allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each in its own orbit runs” (36 : 38-40).

This statement of the Quran has been borne out in the present world by human observations, and this in itself is enough to prove that the universe is governed by some conscious being. Without this the universe could never have been disciplined and harmonious to such a degree of perfection as it is.

11 May 1986

Being careful what one says

'Abdullah Tastari said that one who makes a new addition to religious learning will be questioned on the Day of Resurrection. "If what he has said is in accordance with the pattern of the Prophet, then he will be saved. If not, he will be doomed."

Avoiding Misunderstandings

Towards the end of his commentary on the Surah of the Quran entitle "The Night Journey" or "The Children of Israel", Ibn Kathir has related the following incident:

"An idolator heard the Prophet supplicating God by His names Rahman (The Beneficent) and Rahim (The Merciful). 'I thought that he called on only one God,' the man commented. 'Yet, here he is, calling on two.'

From this straightforward incident one can see how many doubts and suspicions stem from a mere lack of understanding. God is One in His essence, but He has multiple names or attributes. The Prophet Mohammad, may peace be upon him, used to call upon his Lord by these names. He was supplicating One God, but using several different names to do so. The Arab idolator considered multiplicity of attributes to be an indication of multiplicity of being. He thought that the Prophet was calling on several gods, whereas in fact he was calling on just One God. His lack of understanding led him to think of a monotheist as a polytheist, like himself.

Man is a tremendously complex being. His life has innumerable, interrelated aspects. That is why it is extremely difficult to form a correct opinion about someone. There is at least a fifty-fifty chance of coming to the wrong conclusion. For this reason one should be very careful in forming opinions about others. It does not matter if one is hasty in forming a good opinion about someone. One has to be meticulously careful, though, in forming bad opinions. First one must look at every aspect of the situation, and then come to a reasoned and sober conclusion on the basis of all the available information.

Whenever a person forms an opinion, he does so within the arena of his own knowledge. The bounds of reality, however, are much more extensive than the bounds of any single person's knowledge. One might easily consider an opinion correct then within the context of the limited information available to one, while, in the context of wider realities, that opinion may prove to be quite wrong. For this reason, one should be highly generous in forming good opinions, and equally sparing in jumping to bad conclusions. This is both the common-sense and the God-fearing way of making a just evaluation of one's fellow men.

13 May 1986

Then Came the Eclipse

Spain, situated at the south western extremity of Europe, had been a very backward area for thousands of years. At the beginning of the 8th century, Arab Muslims invaded it and set it on the road to progress for the first time in its history. During the subsequent 800-year Muslim rule, Spain made extraordinary progress, and it was this once backward country which paved the way for the brilliant modern Civilization of Europe.

When the Moorish Empire was in its heyday, the Christians, with their blind prejudices, did not see fit to give due acknowledgement to Muslim achievement in Spain, and began plotting against the empire. Internal differences between the Muslims gave them the opportunity they sought to overthrow the Moors and, by the end of the 15th century, the Muslim empire saw its end in Spain.

"The final order of expulsion was signed by Philip III in 1609, resulting in the forcible deportation en masse of practically all Muslims on Spanish soil ... it is estimated that about three million Muslims were banished or executed."

(*History of the Arabs*, by Philip K. Hitti p. 556).

The consequences of this action did not, however, fulfill the hopes of the Spanish Christians. It may, to a certain extent, have satisfied their prejudiced mentality, but otherwise it served no good purpose. After the expulsion of the Muslims, Spain made little progress in the succeeding centuries. Spain is a case in point from which other countries may learn: prejudice exacts an even greater toll from the person who feels it, than from the person against whom it is directed. The noted historian, Lane-Poole, in his book entitled, *Moors in Spain* writes:

"The Moors were banished; for a while Christian Spain shone, like the moon, with a borrowed light; then came the eclipse, and in that darkness, Spain has grovelled over since" (p. 280).

There was a time when the entry of Muslims into any place meant the advent of progress, while their expulsion spelt its end. Today, it is unfortunate that the very reverse seems to be true.

t14 May 1986

The Mirage

A few months ago, a Mr. R.N. Pandey, a second lieutenant in the Indian Army, mistakenly boarded the Jammu Tawi Express, thinking it was the Itkal Express. It was only as the train steamed out of the station that he realised he was on the wrong train. When the train was nearing Okhla, in desperation he opened the door and jumped out of the train, which by then was hurtling along at full speed. He never reached the platform. He fell down under the train on to the railway track and was cut to pieces by the wheels. And so, on the 12th November, 1985, at the promising age of 35, death came to claim him for its own.

The successful man who runs a lucrative industry, owns a palatial mansion, drives where he wills in limousines and possesses all kinds of status symbols including a circle of wealthy and elegant friends, has all the things which add up to success in this world. Yet he is no more immune to misfortune than Lieutenant Pandey. At any moment his factory can close, his house can crumble around him, his cars can skid with him to destruction and his friends can one by one desert him. Those self and same things which were such glittering symbols of success can become like so much dross under his feet and under whose deadweight he may be buried forever.

As soon as the true nature of material things is laid bare, they appear no more attractive than tombstones. To all intents and purposes, material progress leads one to the splendid mansions of success. But, if we were to face up to the reality, we would see that it takes us only as far as the graveyard – and not one step beyond.

The real pleasures are those of the next world, while the pleasures of this world are only a mirage. The greatest mistake man can make is to pursue what is superficially attractive in this world, while neglecting what is to be achieved in the next; in this way, he will have success in neither.

14 May 1986

To be sparing in one's speech is a sign of sincerity

Abdullah ibn Abbas said that he had seen no one better than the companions of the Prophet. "They only asked the Prophet about thirteen matters – all of which are mentioned in the Quran – until the day he died." Ibn 'Abbas also said that the companions only used to question the Prophet on matters which were relevant to them.

15 May 1986

Starting Point

When the Prophet of Islam left his home town of Mecca and emigrated to Medina, these words were on his lips: "Mecca, my dear and beautiful town. If my people had not expelled me, I would never have lived anywhere else."

The Prophet resigned himself to being deprived of his beloved country and the result of this was that Medina became a powerful centre of Islam. If, instead of emigrating to Medina, he had followed a policy of head-on confrontation with the people of Mecca, the history of Islam would have ended before it had started. Its first step forward would have been its last.

To resign oneself to loss is truly the most intelligent action, and to fail to do so is sheer folly. Here lies the secret of success and failure, both in this world and the next.

To reconcile oneself to loss amounts to accepting matters as they actually are. When one accepts matters as they really are, one knows where to start working from.

If, on the other hand, one does not accept things as they are, one will work to achieve things which are never going to come one's way.

On hearing this, the shortsighted will say: this means that a person or nation that is in a deprived state today should accept being deprived forever. But such thoughts spring from total unfamiliarity with the ways of life. Life is an evolving reality, in which nothing remains as it is. When one resigns oneself to occupying one's real position – it is as though one is putting oneself in a position where life's evolutionary capacity can be activated. One can then proceed to the next stage in life. Those who reconcile themselves to loss know their starting point, and to know one's starting point is the greatest secret behind arriving at one's destination.

As one philosopher put it: "Politics is a game of possibilities." This means that one should start with what is possible today. Only then will one achieve tomorrow that is impossible today. If, on the other hand, one starts from the impossible, one's journey will never get under way. The possible will elude one, and the impossible too.

Some guests came to see Jabir. He brought them bread and vinegar to eat. Aiman says that he had heard the Prophet remark what an excellent condiment vinegar was. The Prophet also said that people who showed disdain for what they were offered would be destroyed.

(Baihaqi)

16 May 1986

The Victory of the Mind

Just after the murder of Egypt's President, Anwar Sadat (1918-1981) the *Time Magazine* published a special feature on this event (19 October, 1981) which started with a famous question put by Napoleon to his people in his final days; "Do you know what seem the most astonishing thing in the world to me?" The answer, which he gave himself, was, "It is the inability of power to achieve anything. In the end, the sword is always conquered by the mind."

Anwar Sadat was a leader who had acquired all conceivable power. But that did not prevent his being done to death at the very moment when the celebrations of the 1973 Suez victory were at their heights, and he was proudly taking the salute at a march past of his troops. As a security precaution, all dignitaries and other visitors had been thoroughly examined by a metal detector, and even the rifles of the soldiers taking part in the parade had been emptied of bullets. But inspite of all this, one of the soldiers suddenly ran out of the parade and, before the President's bodyguards could stop him, had emptied his pistol at Mr. Sadat.

This gruesome affair was a victory of the mind over the sword. Sadat's opponents had circulated propaganda among the public that their president had forsaken his faith and that on this account his being killed was, as they saw it, justified. This rumour had its effect on a large section of the public, including a certain lieutenant, a Mr. Khalid, who hailed from Istanbul. He set about planning the murder of the president with the help of some of his colleagues and, on the day of the victory parade circumstances being favourable, his plan went into execution.

It is an incontrovertible fact that the mind is far more powerful than the sword. Innumerable examples can be found in history to testify to this truth.

It is regrettable, however, that so far as peaceful, constructive activities are concerned, the mind is seldom applied in this way. Most of the mentally gifted people in the forefront of politics, economics, science and technology have bestowed upon mankind little more than the techniques of destruction. There are few of the very talented people in this world who have ever bent their natural gifts to anything other than destructive ends.

17 May 1986

Are there Blind Forces in Nature?

Do they not look at the camels, how they are made? (The Quran)

The camel is one of the unique creations of God. It serves as a sign for those who disbelieve Him. Besides giving us milk, meat, wool and hide, as other animals do, a camel is endowed with some unique characteristics, hence its title, 'Ship of the Desert'. It escorts man on his unbearably harsh journey through barrenness of the hot, dry deserts of sand.

Water resources, in the desert, are very few and far between. Camels can go for about twenty five days in winter and about five days in summer without water. They can travel, carrying their master, for 400 kilo-meters at a stretch, without receiving so much as a drop of water. And when it arrives at an oasis, it stores water in vast quantities as though its hump were a water tank. In a short span of ten minutes, it can take in about one hundred litres of water, which keeps it going for several weeks.

In times of scarcity of water, during a journey, he can live on his own resources. Very astonishing indeed. Recent researches have shown that camels' humps are like generators of water. In adverse conditions, it draws on this reserve by converting the stored fat into water through some mysterious chemistry.

The Camel loses its body water slowly, and can regain lost weight in ten minutes by drinking as many as 25 gallons of water!

Standing seven feet tall at the shoulder, they can subsist on coarse, sparse food such as thorny plants and dried grass.

Ranging through many colours from white to black, they have double rows of protective eyelashes, haired eye-openings, the ability to close the nostrils and keen senses of sight and smell, just the sort of things required to help them adopt to their harsh environment.

When kneeling, they are supported by horny pads on the chest and knees. Their long limbs and soft, widespread two-toed feet enable them to walk on sand or snow.

Inspite of being a wild animal, it is docile when properly trained. Man can see in everyday life, signs like these, which are full of meaning, high design, and the goodness of God to man.

18 May 1986

When Life Ceases – What Then?

When a murderer is sentenced to death, from the moment the sentence is pronounced, he is as good as dead. Whether his execution is to take place the very next day or weeks later is of no consequence: life simply loses all meaning for him. All smiles are wiped from his face and it is with difficulty that he brings himself to speak. His hands, once raised so savagely to rain blows upon the weak and innocent, now hang limp and lifeless by his sides. He becomes a forlorn creature, a mere shadow of his former self.

The judgement in court has made plain the reality – a man's sudden fall from power to powerlessness, from light to darkness, from material triumph to nothingness. Even before death, he finds himself in a world where his will is no longer his own. What, then, will be his fate after death? After death, he will enter another world where he will be forced to bow to the will of the creator.

Were man to remember this reality, his life would undergo the most sublime of transformations. It would then be brought home to him with tremendous force how inane it was to oppress the poor, unfortunate individuals who crossed his path and fell into his clutches. He would realize how senseless it was to ill-treat others, if he himself were to be subjected to divine retribution in the after-life. He would finally understand how mindless it was to entertain ideas of his own greatness, for greatness which cannot endure is of no intrinsic value. In the end, having realized all this, he would hang his head in shame.

Man drifts through life, an unthinking, pleasure-seeking, materially ambitious creature who enjoys making friends and accumulating riches. He revels in trivial distractions. Then something happens which stops him dead in his tracks. All of his faculties fail him. His eyes are sightless, his breathing stops. Death has come unannounced and unbidden. And in an instant he is bereft of all his worldly possessions, his friends, his pleasures, his riches – all that he holds dear – and he is carried away to the utter solitude of the grave.

Everyone alive today is under the sentence of death. But people are preoccupied with today and give no thought to tomorrow. In this world everyone is to a greater or lesser degree a culprit, but few pay heed to the fact that death is perpetually stalking us, and can catch us unawares – it can even strike tomorrow.

19 May 1986

True Religion

Initially, religion starts off as God-made religion but slowly, over the ages, it turns into man-made religion. This is true of every religion including Islam. With Islam, however, there is one difference. Other religions have been corrupted in both practice and substance: that is, people have fashioned both their actions and their scriptures according to self-made precepts; religion as revealed by God has been succeeded by religion made by man. With Islam the practice has altered but the substance remains the same. Human interpolations have altered the way religion is observed; but no one has been able to tamper with the Quran and Hadith: they are present now in the very form they were found in 1400 years ago, when the Prophet of Islam first taught them to the world.

Religion in its true form is to realize that the universe has one Lord and Maker: God, before whom man will one day have to answer for his actions. Discovery of God on the one hand, and realization of one's own answerability before Him on the other, are integral parts of religion. Religion, then, is a spontaneous outpouring which wells up from the depths of man's soul.

One blessed with true religious feeling of this nature becomes a completely different person from what he was before. Filled with thoughts of the Supreme Reality, he forsakes all delusions of personal grandeur. When he speaks, it is with control and self-restraint, for he knows that God hears what he is saying. When he acts, it is in a principled and responsible fashion, for he knows that God sees what he does. His thoughts are always on pleasing God. His dealings with mortals are conducted as if with God Himself, so scrupulous and honest is his behaviour.

This is true religion, and it is this true religion that every prophet has brought to the world. What people did afterwards, however, was change God's religion into a religion moulded by their own saints and scholars. This is as true of Muslims as it is of other denominations. But with Islam, God has Himself arranged for the preservation of the Quran in its original state. Those who wish to know what their Lord requires of them should read the Quran, for there they will find the untainted word of God. There is no other way to find God, for all other scriptures have been altered by the hand of man.

20 May 1986

Man's Earnings

This is a verse of the chapter of the Quran entitled "Al-Ahqaf":

"On the day when the unbelievers are brought before the Fire, (We shall say to them):'You squandered away your precious things in your earthly life and took your fill of pleasure. An ignominious punishment shall be yours this day, because you behaved with pride without just cause on earth and committed evil."

(Quran, 46:20)

Man has been endowed with certain faculties in this world. He has been invested with bodily strength, and blessed with intellectual prowess. He has been granted access to wealth, rank, resources and opportunities. All these human faculties are from God. He has given them to man for a purpose: that man should use them to earn something for himself.

There are two ways for man to "earn". One is that which leads to what the Quran here calls "pride without just cause on earth and evil." But there is another form of earning, which is the very opposite of this one, and that is the earning of humility and graciousness from what one has. Let us put this another way. If a person is proud of what he has in this world; if he uses it for his own self-aggrandizement; if he makes it just a stepping stone to personal power: in all these cases he has wasted his energies. He has wasted them because he has expended them on this ephemeral world. What, then, can be left for him in the eternal world of God?

The other form of earning comes from seeing the resources with which we have been endowed in life as God's gift. It is then that one sees one's own helplessness before God, and lives in thanks giving to Him for His countless blessings. Instead of using one's faculties and resources for personal ends, one devotes them to the service of God. Earnings gained in this way from the opportunities of life will stand one in good stead in the long run, for they will remain with one into eternity. One's earnings will open out to one in the form of the everlasting gardens of paradise; there one will be able to taste the fruits of one's earthly efforts.

Everyone has been given opportunities in this world; some are using them to earn the world, others to gain life everlasting.

Options

A person posted abroad receives a message from home. His son is seriously ill. He must return home immediately. The man is stunned by the news. No matter how many important tasks he has to attend to, he disregards them all and heads for home. He forsakes his work and leisure; he spends his hard-earned money, compromising his financial interests for the sake of his son. Everything else assumes secondary importance. There is nothing that matters now, except his son. His response to the message he has received is immediate: he disregards all other demands and takes the next plane home, so that he can be at his son's bedside.

Now the same person receives another message – one from God – again calling on him to attend to a matter of the utmost urgency. But this message does not have the same shattering effect on him. He is not moved to act upon it. Instead all kinds of misgivings crop up in his mind. The person bringing him this message, he ponders, is just an ordinary human being; there seems to be nothing special about him; he does not enjoy the approval of any of the established “greats” of society. Added to this, the one who receives that message is afraid that acceptance of it will severely compromise his worldly interests: to admit that it is right will mean acknowledging that he himself has been in the wrong. Swayed by group prejudices, self-interest, expediency and egoism, he fails to answer the call of God. Either he denies it out of hand, or else he accepts it with reservations. He does not deem it necessary to act upon the divine message he receives. It does not move him, as the message concerning his son's illness does.

The Quran has referred to such a person's attitude in the following words: “No soul can have faith except by the will of God. He will visit His scourge upon the senseless.” (10 : 100). God has endowed man with an intellect, enabling him to accept anything which is backed up by sound reason. To follow one's intellect is to tread the path of truth, which will lead one to salvation. To follow the dictates of desire and prejudice, on the other can only lead one to damnation.

In this world of trial and tribulation there are always two paths open before a person. One is able either to accept or reject that which is proved by solid evidence. By acceptance of truth is meant giving it precedence over everything else; one who fails to accept truth will let all kinds of extraneous issues block his vision of truth. This is what the Quran has called senselessness. Senselessness is to conduct irrelevant hair-splitting in what in reality is as plain as day; it is to put personal profit and sectarian interests before reason; it is to take what conforms to one's personal taste, and leave what does not appeal to one; it is to let apprehension of personal detriment prevent one from bowing to truth. The first path is the path of true good sense, while the second is that of mental perversion, that which the Quran calls the scourge of God. When an individual does not put to good use the intellect with which God has endowed him, it is as though he is accommodating the devil in his mind and heart. He is giving Satan the place that should

be allotted to God. Satan takes hold of such a person, making matters of substance appear trivial in his sight and elevating other insignificant matters to undue heights of importance. A mind which is occupied by Satan is a perverted mind; it is a mind which deviates from the course of nature, adopting the crooked paths that Satan, in all his ingenuity, lays out for it.

God has created the universe according to a certain pattern. It is by following that pattern that man can find true guidance. What is this pattern of creation? It can be seen within man – in his conscience. Everyone has been given a conscience, which in every matter shows one the path that conforms to nature, and that which contradicts it. One should eschew any matter over which one's conscience pricks one, acting only where one's conscience is at ease. That is to follow the pattern of God's creation. This pattern can also be seen in man's intellect. God has endowed man with the power to distinguish between what is backed up by solid evidence, and that which does not have any proof in support of it. To follow the pattern of God's creation is to do that which appears to one's intellect to be reasonable and right, avoiding that which is unreasonable and wrong. God's pattern of creation can also be observed in the universe around us. God has created a universe of ultimate perfection and propriety. Whenever we have to decide what position to adopt on a certain matter, the universe provides us with silent but meaningful clues as to what that position should be. It shows us what we should do to conform to God's pattern of creation, and what would amount to a contradiction of that pattern. In order to live in accordance with God's pattern of creation, we have only to follow the cosmic clues with which He has provided us.

A life in accordance with God's pattern of creation is a life of truth. The Quran, revealed by God, is a guide-book showing us how to follow that pattern. One who is sincere in his search for truth, alive to the call of nature, will surely find truth if he allows himself to be guided by the Quran. One who lacks the necessary sincerity, however, will not be swayed by its words: He will only be brought to his senses by the universal awakening which will come when the veil is removed from the world of realities. But then because he has no other option but to accept the truth, it will do him no good to do so at that time.

23 May 1986

Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

There is nowhere in the world today where Muslims are not being persecuted by their own brethren. Persecutors, who would cringe before the mighty, find it easy to be brave and fearless when dealing with the weak and defenceless for it is seldom that the latter have a large circle of friends and supporters. But they are wrong when they think of the weak as having no support, for they have the best support of all – God's support. He is always by their side.

Whatever happens in this world happens because people are being tested. God wants to put them to the test in order to know which of them are God-fearing and which are not. How are they to be tested if they are confronted with the strong who, because of their wealth and power, inspire awe and reverence? People hesitate to lay their hands on the high and mighty because they fear them, and not God.

But there are those who do not possess any of those worldly props which are so awe-inspiring. If people show kindness to such weaker members of society, it is not for any material gain, but because God has commanded them to do so. It is through them that God puts the stronger people to the test; fearing the weak means that they fear God, and the reward for such people is paradise. Those who do not fear the consequences of being unjust to such people do not truly fear God. Individuals such as those will be consigned to eternal hell fire and damnation.

23 May 1986

Those who do not control their tongues are evil

The Prophet asked his companions if he should tell them who was worst amongst them. The companions asked him to do so. "Those who seek to slander others and create discord among friends; those who lay false accusations upon innocent people," the Prophet said. (Ahmad)

24 May 1986

Warding off Danger

I once went to spend a few days at a religious institution situated on the outskirts of Alwar, a city in Rajasthan. To the one side there extended the building of the city and, to the other, there were open fields stretching far and wide. During my stay there, I went out one evening at sunset to have a walk in the fields. Unfortunately, after I had gone some distance, I was rushed at by a pack of dogs all barking and snarling. I had to throw stones at them to chase them away. On my return, I mentioned to my host how I had almost been set upon by these animals. My host, Maulana Mufti Jamaluddin Qasmi, who presides over the institution, simply smiled and said, "All right, I'll come with you tomorrow." The following day, we set off together, the Maulana having armed himself with a stick which was quite long enough to be visible from afar. When we reached the spot where I had come upon the dogs the day before, they were there all right, but, there was not so much as a whimper out of them, far less a bark. Not one of them made a move to rush at us. So we passed by undisturbed. On our way back, they were still there, but, they did not create a commotion this time either, and we reached home without any untoward incidents. "That was the miracle of the big stick," said the Maulana with a smile. "Yesterday you were unarmed, so those wretched curs dared to attack. Today it was a very different story, for the dogs, immediately realizing that you were well-equipped to deal with them, lost courage and gave up any idea they had of attacking. A dog will attack you only if he thinks you are vulnerable. But he would not do so if he found you armed."

There are certain of the human species too, who, sadly, will behave well only when you have a 'big stick' in your hand. But the moment they find you defenceless they become bold. They are the type of people who are brave when dealing with those weaker than themselves, and who are out and out cowards when confronted with anyone stronger. This unfortunate state of affairs calls for people to be well-equipped to deal effectively with such unworthy individuals. In society, one ought, in principle, to be peaceable, humble and courteous to all. But to be practical one should be well armed to meet adverse situations, so that others are discouraged at the outset from harming one. Where would all our beautiful roses be, if nature had not provided them with innumerable thorns?

Aiming High

Several disgruntled Muslim youths stood in an agitated group outside the University Offices loudly bewailing the fact that they had not been admitted to the various academic courses they had chosen. Without exception, they blamed circumstances for their failure to gain entry to the University. Some also blamed the environment for their having remained out of work for so long. An elderly gentleman, who was sifting close by, could not help overhearing their lamentations. Finally, he could contain himself no longer, and he jumped up and said to them, "I am sure you feel your complaints are well-founded, but, why compete at a level where the seats are all bound to be taken already? That will get you nowhere. You should attempt to enter at the top, for that is where you will find the vacant seats. Produce distinctive qualifications and there will be no question of your being rejected. There are always places at the top for people of distinctive merit. Be you student, businessman, lawyer or doctor, try to distinguish yourself in whatever field you have chosen, for that is the sure way to success. Even if it is only something like a mousetrap that you have the reputation for making well, people will come knocking at your door for it. The real mistake is to produce the same quality of goods with which the market is already flooded. It is pointless to do this, then complain about being discriminated against. If you work hard and bend your brains to producing something superior in design and quality to what is already in the market, people will flock to buy it.

"No society is ever free of prejudice and narrow-mindedness; it is just one unfortunate aspect of community-living. The difference in this from one society to another is only one of degree. But these are barriers which can definitely be surmounted through diligence and application. Let us suppose that you have passed an examination with 45 percent marks, giving you a very slight advantage over a rival who only has forty percent. In such a case, it is quite conceivable that prejudice could come in your way, and your application could be rejected in favour of your rival's. But let us suppose that you had eighty percent marks. All the walls of prejudice would then have to crumble and fall in the face of superior talent. No one would then dare deny you your rights. Does it not make sense then to try your hardest to reach the highest pinnacles of academic success? It is only a question of working much harder than your rival. Then the world will be convinced that you have not only set yourself the highest standards, but have also lived up to them.

Once launched upon life with superior knowledge and skills, there is no question of your failing to find the place you deserve. Every door will open to you, because it is invariably the highly qualified who are in demand."

26 May 1986

Pouring Oil on Troubled Waters

Bertrand Russell was a liberal in the fullest sense of the word. He often expressed thoughts which were so unconventional as to be profoundly disturbing to the more conservative members of his audiences. In his autobiography he writes of an incident which took place in the course of one of his lectures:

"A man rose in fury, remarking that I looked like a monkey; to which I replied, "Then you will have the pleasure of hearing the voice of your ancestor" (p. 565).

We do not have to deal here with the truth or falsehood of the theory of evolution. We have simply quoted Russell's words as a good example of how to deal with provocation. When someone is critical of what you say and lashes out at you, you may retort in the same harsh manner, or on the other hand, you may make some quip which will happily divert attention from the matter under dispute. Another way is simply to remain unprovoked. No matter how strongly you are tempted to indulge in counter-criticism, you should keep your temper, for the best response can never be one of sharp reaction; if you make a response at all, it should be well thought-out and positive.

Stinging retorts only stir up further controversy, whereas lighthearted banter, or the humble submission of alternative ideas can have a tranquillizing effect – like throwing water on a blazing fire. It is also effective in silencing an audience, as in the above-mentioned anecdote where it was Bertrand Russell's humour which made his riposte so effective. Had he reacted adversely, he could never have retained the interest or attention of his audience. His lecture could easily have ended in chaos.

27-28 May 1986

Character Building

The dictionary of National Biography was first published in London just over one hundred years ago, in January 1985. When the idea to supply "full, accurate and concise biographies of all noteworthy inhabitants of the British Islands and colonies from the earliest period to the present time", was first conceived by publisher George Smith (1824-1901) he was treading ground on which all who had gone before him had failed. The Biographical Britannica had taken five large volumes to reach the letter F, and had then expired. The Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge published seven half volumes, on people whose names begin with A, but never got round to the lives of people whose names begin with the rest of the alphabet. Another attempt by Rose reached C in six volumes, and then changed gear to do D to Z in another six volumes.

Smith chose as his editor Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), literary critic and father of the writer Virginia Woolf. The first thing that Stephen did was to dissuade Smith from his original idea of compiling a dictionary of Universal Biography. Stephen, in what Smith called his "knowledge and sound judgement", realized that this was a project too ambitious for there to be any realistic hope of it reaching completion. Then, in 1883, Stephen published in the Athenaeum a list of names for the letter A, inviting scholars to propose further names and to offer themselves as contributors. This was followed by further lists, each containing some 1000 names, twice a year, year after year, and then with amazing regularity the volumes were published on quarter-day four times a year for fifteen and a half years. The dictionary was finally completed in 63 volumes.

But Leslie Stephen was not fated to see the completion of the work which he had so painstakingly started. It had taken every thing out of him. He suffered a severe nervous breakdown and it was the assistant editor Sidney Lee (1859-1926) who saw the work through. The effort that the DNB had taken out of Leslie Stephen is expressed in his own heart-rending words:

"That damned thing goes on like a diabolical piece of machinery, always gaping for more copy."

(*The Guardian*, February 3, 1985)

Commemorating the centenary of the DNB The *Guardian* wrote that "it was one of those massive undertakings that only the Victorians could be megalomaniac: enough to conceive, and only the Victorians could have had the energy and industriousness to carry out." In truth, any great undertaking requires energy and industriousness of this nature. If one is not ready to give one's all, no worthwhile task can be achieved.

28 May 1986

Not a Minute to Spare

Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist who was deeply moved by the trials and tribulations of his people, gave concrete shape in his stories to their unenviable existence. He inevitably incurred the wrath of the Soviet authorities, and felt forced to seek asylum in the U.S.A., where he now lives quietly, in Vermont, busily writing various books.

In May 1982, he received an invitation from the American government to participate in official ceremony to be held in his honour at the White House in Washington. Besides other dignitaries, the U.S. President himself intended to grace the occasion. This programme included a special 15 minute meeting of Solzhenitsyn with Mr. Reagan. Solzhenitsyn, however, replied to the President on May 3rd, 1982, regretting his inability to attend. He wrote: "The life span at my disposal does not leave me time for ceremonial encounters."

His well-defined objective – to narrate in novel form the heartening tales of his countrymen's lives – occupied his mind to such an extent that he felt he had not a minute to spare, and had no choice but to reject invitations to events which were likely to prove time-consuming—even if the invitation came from the U.S. President himself.

When a man has a specific and worthwhile goal before him, he sets a great value upon his time, but when bereft of a goal, time hangs heavily upon his hands. It is then that ceremonial gatherings and vain pursuits become welcome occupations. He makes no real life for himself but depends upon others for occupation and distraction. In this way, he drifts along, like a ship without a rudder, to the end of his useless life. On the surface, he has led a full, busy life, but, on closer inspection, he discovers, too late, that his achievements are nil, and that he has frittered away his precious existence in empty, meaningless diversions.

29 May 1986

Message Without Words

A certain student from Rajasthan had failed in his high school examinations. He appeared again the following year, but failed again. After having failed for the third time, the next year he was so ashamed of his performance that he left his home unable to show his face to his family.

He just kept walking about aimlessly. After a long time he stopped at a well to quench his thirst. Women and children had gathered around it, filling their pots by turns. There he caught sight of something. Something small, but of great significance. He was deeply moved, and his thirst was gone. All of a sudden he felt as though he had found something far greater than the water he had come for. What happened was quite simple. The villagers who visited the well for water, usually brought two earthen pots. They would place one pot on a stone near the well while letting the other down on a rope inside the well to draw water. To his astonishment, the part of the stone on which the pot was placed had rubbed away and there was a hollow there. The pot was made of earth, he thought, but when it was placed on the same spot over and over again, it had worn away the stone which was a far harder a substance. The strong element had given way to the weak just through constant action. "Then why should I not succeed in my examinations if I too persevere? I can surely overcome my shortcomings by putting greater effort into my studies!"

Such thoughts brought him to a halt. He immediately decided to go back home and start working hard on his studies once again. The following year he appeared for the fourth time in his high school examinations. This time the result, astonishingly, was the opposite of the previous year. He had done his papers so well this time that he had 1st class marks. After having failed three times he had finally distinguished himself. The lesson of the stone had worked like a miracle and this had altered his attitude altogether. The same student who had run away from home, unable to face defeat, had come to stand first in all the examinations he took. When he topped in his M.A. examination, he was given a scholarship to study abroad and from there he took his doctorate.

This may be a solitary instance that occurred in a certain village, but, indeed, at every place exists such a "stone" which can teach a lesson to man which can point to man's shortcomings and failures provided he shows sufficient receptiveness to the message it conveys. If he only cares to look, he will find around him some such "stone" or the other, which he needs to set him on the right course again.

Dawah Power

The Battle of the Trench took place in the year 5AH, when 10,000 armed men, under Abu Sufyan's command, besieged Medina. The town of the Prophet was engulfed in deep crisis, summed up in these words of the Quran:

"The eyes were blurred, the hearts lept to the throats ..." (33 : 10).

So great was the strain upon the people of Medina at this time that one of the Muslims had this to say:

"Mohammad used to promise us that we would inherit the treasures of Khusrau and Caesar. Yet here we are today, not even able to proceed to relieve ourselves in safety."

(*Seerat Ibn Hisham*, Vo. III, p. 239)

The Prophet used to keep himself informed of the movements of the enemy both in times of peace and war. When Abu Sufyan's army set out from Mecca, the Prophet heard about their progress. He called his followers together for consultation, and asked them what should be done to protect the city.

It was Salman Farsi who suggested that a trench be dug around the city. On one side of Medina a string of date palms afforded natural protection, but the north-eastern and north-western faces of the city were exposed. A trench, about 5,000 feet long, seven to ten feet deep and ten feet wide, was dug on the exposed fronts.

The Muslim historian Ibn Kathir has written, on the authority of Tabari and Suhaili, that the first person to dig a trench of this nature was the Persian king Manuchahr, the son of Faridun. This king was a contemporary of Moses. Salman Farsi was, as his name suggests, of Persian origin, and he was well acquainted with this technique. He told the Prophet of the method Iranian people used to employ for defence against cavalry charges. The Prophet liked the idea, and himself joined with his companions in digging the trench.

The Persian origins of this technique can be seen from the fact that the Arabic word for a trench – Khunduq – also has its roots in the Persian language. Originally the Persian word was Kanda, meaning literally something which has been dug. From Kanda was derived the word kandak, which in Arabic became Khunduq. The reaction of the Meccan army when they set eyes on the trench bears witness to their unfamiliarity with this technique. "By God," they exclaimed, "This is a ploy which Arabs have never used."

What strikes one here is this: the Prophet and his Companions were Arabs too, just as those who were attacking them were Arabs. How was it, then, that the Muslims found someone to inform them of this Persian technique, while their Meccan adversaries found no such person?

The reason for this difference was that the Muslim community was a dynamic unit, fired by the force of a faith that was spreading fast among other nations. As people from foreign lands entered the fold of Islam, the Muslims benefited from their new coreligionists' own particular expertise and experience. Meccan society, by contrast, was in a state of stultification, its doors closed both to the dissemination and assimilation of new ideas. This was a special advantage which Muslim society enjoyed over other societies. Muslims themselves were spurred to communicate their faith to other nations; as a result they gained access to individuals such as Salman Farsi, who taught them the ways of Persia. The Arabs of Mecca, on the other hand, had nothing with which to attract such people, so they remained bereft of the knowledge which would have come with an influx of new people and ideas into their society.

If one looks at these two things together – the Muslims' knowledge of Persian tactics and the Meccans ignorance of them one can see what a great asset it is for a community to be driven by the strength of true conviction. As it communicates its message to other nations, it also assimilates know-how from those with whom it comes into contact. A society which is not fired by such missionary spirit remains a stagnant one, which no one takes anything from, or adds anything to.

It was the power of Dawah – communication of the message of Islam – which put Muslim society at an advantage over all its opponents. Only with revival of the Dawah spirit can then advantage be restored.

31 May 1986

Paying full attention to what even an unimportant person says

Abu Rafa'a Tameem ibn Usyad says that he came from his own land to see the Prophet. "He was giving a sermon when I arrived. I told him that I was a travelling man, and did not know much about religion. 'I have come to hear about it from you,' I said. The Prophet forgot about his sermon, and came towards me. He sat down next to me, and started telling me about what God had revealed to him. After he had finished, he went back and completed his sermon."

(Muslim)